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Opening extract from

Darkness Hidden

Written by

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PREVIOUSLY IN
THE NAME OF THE BLADE TRILOGY...

In search of the perfect costume for the fancy-dress party she's attending with best friend Jack, Mio Yamato steals a priceless antique katana from her family's attic. This turns out to be a big mistake. Paranoia and monstrous visions descend on her, causing her to run into traffic. While unconscious, she dreams of a beautiful warrior boy fighting a nine-tailed cat-demon – a Nekomata. An explosion of power from the sword heals Mio, but she is spooked and tries to put the katana back in its box in the attic. She can't. Trying to walk away from the sword makes her physically ill.

When the Nekomata from Mio's dream appears and tries to take the katana, only the arrival of the dream warrior boy saves her and Jack from the monster's claws. After they escape, they learn that their mysterious saviour, Shinobu, has been trapped in the katana

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for five hundred years.

Foiled, the Nekomata kidnaps Rachel, Jack's older sister. Shinobu calls for help from the Kitsune, immortal spirit foxes who owe him a favour. Mio, Jack and Shinobu travel to the spirit realm with a friendly fox guide – Hikaru – and meet with the powerful Kitsune King. Mio convinces the fox spirits to fight the Nekomata with her, but in the process realizes the danger of the katana's incredible powers.

At the monster's lair in the mortal realm, they enter into a desperate battle. Shinobu sacrifices himself to save Rachel, and Mio gives into rage, bonding with the sword to destroy the Nekomata. Once the cat-demon is dead, Shinobu's wounds miraculously disappear, and he wakes up. Mio and her friends leave the site of the battle triumphant, but knowing their fight for control of the katana has only just begun…

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CHAPTER 1

FAREWELLS

The Kitsune were celebrating.

Their court – a massive natural amphitheatre, hidden deep underground – echoed with wild music and giddy laughter. Immortal fox spirits in both human and animal form wandered up and down the grassy terraces and danced around the huge golden trees that ringed the steep earthen bowl. They had been eating, drinking and making merry for hours. Some of them were making so merry that it was kind of hard to know where to look.

"They are relieved," the king said. His young-sounding voice drifted down to where I stood with Shinobu and Hikaru at the bottom of the Kitsune throne, a low green hill at the centre of the amphitheatre. Despite his grave tone, I thought I saw a hint of pearly fangs – a foxy grin just twitching his whiskers – as he looked at his subjects acting like kids on the first day of the summer holidays.

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"It has been a long time since any of our people marched into battle. Some feared that victory over the Nekomata could only be bought with our sorrow."

I met his acid-green eyes for a fraction of a second. The sheer weight of ancient power there made my spine go loose and jelly-like. In its new, finely crafted leather harness on my back, the katana gave a sullen buzz. *You shut up,* I ordered it. The last thing I needed right now was the sword interfering again. I transferred my gaze to the king's paws and stared at them determinedly.

A faint sensation of warmth in the pit of my stomach told me that Shinobu, who stood a little way off to my left, was staring at me with the same concentration I was giving to the king's feet. A part of me needed to meet that look – yearned to, the way that you yearn to rest when you're tired or eat when you're hungry. But I couldn't. When we arrived back in the Kitsune Kingdom we were separated almost straight away, and by the time we saw each other again all the old awkwardness – and some new, extra awkwardness for good measure – had somehow sprung up between us.

What was supposed to happen next?

Were we going out now?

Did people even go out with each other five hundred years ago?

He hadn't exactly asked or anything. But he had kissed me, so maybe that counted…

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And why did any of that matter to me when he made me feel the way he did? He'd fought for me, died for me, and I'd thought he was lost forever – but then he came back, just like a miracle. I flinched from the memory of the scaffolding pole breaking through his chest, the blood gushing up around it like a red flower…

The green blade flashes down in the red light—

I flinched.

Hikaru cleared his throat conspicuously at my elbow. I'd let the silence drag on too long. The king was waiting. I rubbed at burning eyes with the palm of one hand and tried to force my sleep-deprived brain to whirr into gear. *Inter-dimensional diplomacy now. Freak-out later.*

"The Kitsune Kingdom should be proud, Your Majesty," I said, finally. "Your people marched right up to the gateway of Yomi with us. If it weren't for them, we'd never have made it in there. They were incredible. Especially Hikaru."

Hikaru shuffled in place, his face slowly flushing dull red.

A tiny sizzle of blue-white lightning passed between two of the king's nine tails. The fan-like spread, one for each of the hundred years that he had lived up to the age of one thousand, marked him as the most ancient of the immortals here. "But even with my best warriors at your disposal, it was you who slew the Nekomata, sword-bearer. Alone. Though its powers were beyond anything

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my Araki-san had seen in all her long life."

He was making it sound like I was a hero, which was laughably far from true. Hikaru, Araki, Shinobu, Hiro and Jack had done … amazing things. I had messed up – again – and let the sword take me over. Let it take my human anger and twist it into an inhuman desire to kill and destroy. The battle with the Nekomata had been over very quickly after that. And if I hadn't managed to kill it so quickly, I wasn't sure what would have happened to me. Just a few minutes longer, and I might not have been able to resist the sword's beguiling voice in my mind when it offered me power in return for its "freedom", even though every instinct I had told me that the sword's idea of being free was most definitely not a good thing for me or the world.

But this wasn't the time to kick my own butt over that. Or the place, either. I had to keep it together and get us home.

"Well, it wasn't exactly like that," I mumbled. "But … thanks."

There was a pause. It felt significant. I tried to figure out what else I should have said.

"Sword-bearer." The king's voice rang like the toll of a warning bell. "You have not yet asked for the favour that was promised you."

"Oh." I blinked a couple of times in my bewilderment and ended up looking the king in the face again by

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accident – *damn* – before I managed to glue my gaze to his ear.

After we'd left the abandoned power station at Battersea, the fox spirits had hustled us straight back through a rupture in the veil between the mortal realm and the spirit world. We'd washed in steaming, opal-green hot-springs under the trees while the Kitsune brought us delicious food and ministered to us with strange potions and ointments that magically numbed the pain of our various injuries. I'd taken the brunt of the Nekomata's attack last night, and after our little disagreement on who was going to be wielding whom, the sword had shown no signs of being willing to heal me the way it had when I had the car accident, so I'd really appreciated those potions. Once we were fed and fixed up, the Kitsune gave us clean clothes to replace the shredded, blood-covered ones we'd fought in. I had new leather boots that fitted me as if they'd been hand-tailored for my feet, and a new back harness for the katana. The plain wakizashi and katana that Shinobu had borrowed for the battle were taken away and replaced by a much finer pair with silver wrappings and a saya inlaid with mother of pearl.

The Kitsune had lavished particular care on Rachel, and by extension Jack, since Jack wouldn't leave her sister's side even if Rachel had been willing to let go of Jack's hand. Being kidnapped and held captive by a psychotic cat-demon had already pushed her to the limit. Jack's

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and my mostly unedited confession of just what had been going on before and during her ordeal – swords of mass destruction, trapped warrior spirits, immortal armies and all – had been too much. Rachel was almost catatonic with shock by the time Hikaru had carried her into the spirit realm. But the last time I'd checked, Jack and Rachel were tucked under a tree listening to soothing music and drinking warm drinks, with Rachel just nodding off on Jack's shoulder. They'd both looked much better.

The spirit foxes had treated us like treasured members of their own family who had returned from some legendary quest. And since no one had mentioned the favour that the king had promised me again, I'd sort of assumed this treatment was their way of paying us back for taking the Nekomata out while managing to bring Hikaru and all the other soldiers back alive.

You should never assume anything when dealing with supernatural creatures. I ought to have learned that by now.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I hadn't forgotten, but I thought…" I gestured at myself and then at Shinobu. "I thought that your kind attention to us was payment enough for any service that we – um – might have performed for you."

There was another growling silence. Hikaru rolled his eyes at me. His blush had faded to leave him tense and pale.

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Crap. What did I say? What didn't *I say?*

Shinobu took a step closer, his large frame unmistakably shielding mine. My hand brushed against his sleeve, and suddenly, regardless of everything else that was happening, I *had* to look at him.

Those endlessly dark eyes were waiting to meet mine. Our gazes connected with an almost physical shock, and the strange connection between us leapt up, alive and dangerous, like the arcs of electricity that danced between the king's fanned tails. I stopped breathing as I heard Shinobu's sharp intake of breath.

There you are, the yearning part of me whispered, deep inside. *I've got you. I won't let go.*

One of Shinobu's eyebrows quirked expectantly. *You can do this. Go on.*

I made myself start breathing again and reluctantly turned my attention back to the immortal ruler stewing in front of me. *All right, he's right. I* can *do this. Focus.*

"If the offer of a favour from Your Majesty still stands," I began, "would it be possible for me to hold it in reserve for now? I wouldn't want to waste such a – a precious thing by failing to consider it properly."

Hikaru let out a little sigh, and his tail drooped in what looked like relief. The king inclined his head regally. "A very wise request, Yamato-dono. The Kitsune shall stand ready to serve you."

Thank God.

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"Now that all matters of business have been discussed, I thought you would wish to return home. We shall summon your other companions from their rest, and a new rupture from my throne to your place of residence in the mortal realm will be readied."

In other words: *Get lost, humans.* Fine by me.

"Your Majesty is very thoughtful," I said. "Thank you again."

The king inclined his head once, stood, and was gone. I blinked. Either he was very, very fast, or he'd just gone invisible. Something to bear in mind for the future…

Then I saw Jack and Rachel heading down the green terraces towards us – and Rachel was walking under her own power, without hanging onto Jack. Long, damp hair fell around her face in thick curls that the world never usually got to see. There was a faint flush in her golden-brown cheeks, and the blank stare from earlier was gone. She looked better than Jack even, since Jack still had a black eye. Relief brought a huge grin to my face. The fox spirits' medicine and music had done an amazing job.

"Hiya, She-Ra!" Jack called cheerily, dodging around a couple of giggling Kitsune.

"Hey!" I ran to meet them. "How are you—"

The words choked off as the sight of Rachel's neck hit me like a hammer to the gut.

The Kitsune had given her some dark trousers and a clean white shirt. The last time I saw her, the shirt had

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been buttoned up to her throat – but Rachel had undone some of the buttons now, and the open collar revealed a horrifying wound on her neck. A ragged circle of deep puncture marks and torn, puffy skin. It was the size of a dinner plate.

A bite.

A Nekomata bite.

Nekomata were blood drinkers – that was how they stole people's shapes and memories. The monster had Rachel all to itself in its lair for hours before we finally turned up to rescue her. It had used her like a cat toy in its sick game.

"What?" Rachel's tentative smile disappeared and she grabbed the collar of her shirt, clutching it together. *"What?"*

Jack aimed a glare at me over her sister's shoulder. *This is not about you, Mio. Get it together!*

"No – um – nothing," I said, stumbling over the words. "Sorry, practically asleep on my feet. How are you both doing?"

Rachel started buttoning her shirt up again with jerky movements. "I'll be better when we can get out of here and go home. I don't know why we even had to come to weirdsville in the first place. It's not like we don't have clean clothes and antiseptic in the flat."

"We could all probably use some real sleep," Jack said, a shade too loudly. She gave Hikaru an apologetic look.

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He shrugged, flashing his fey smile at her. "No biggie. They're readying a way back to the mortal realm for you now. It shouldn't be long." He hesitated, his tail swishing through the air in a wide circle. "So – um – maybe I could – you know, after you're settled back in, I could come and visit … check in, just to see how things are going?"

"Yeah. Right." Jack nodded. "Yeah. We … we need to talk, don't we?"

"Oh, for God's sake," Rachel muttered.

She turned away in apparent disgust, but the vulnerable shape of her back as she hunched over her folded arms sent a sharp stab of guilt and sadness through me. I stepped towards her – not sure if I could repair the damage I'd already caused, but determined to try – and bumped into Shinobu.

"Sorry, I didn't—"

He backed away hastily. "It was my fault, Mio-dono."

We both stared awkwardly at the space between us.

This kept happening. It was like we'd forgotten how to be easy with each other. Every time I thought we'd got that sense of – of *rightness* back, it vanished and left me closing my hands on smoke.

Before I could reach out to either Rachel or Shinobu, or just fall on the floor and have a screaming tantrum – which was pretty tempting at that point – a familiar voice said my name. It was Araki, the king's archer and personal servant. She stood beckoning to us at the base

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of the king's throne in her human form. The king himself was still nowhere to be seen.

"I think that's our cue," I said to the others with my best attempt at lightness. "Ready to blow this popsicle stand?"

"I was ready an hour ago," Rachel said as she stomped forward.

Jack moved past me with Hikaru. They weren't looking at each other, and Hikaru's expression was forlorn. Shinobu and I followed, walking side by side but with a careful distance between us.

We're all pathetic.

I could see the rift into the mortal realm taking shape on the grassy side of the little hill. Long streamers of blue lightning blew out of the earth, dancing in the air and then catching hold of others as they emerged, entwining to form a glowing wreath. When the ring of electricity was complete, the grass it encircled faded out of existence, leaving a gaping black hole in the slope.

Rachel walked right into the rift, leaving the bright light of the spirit realm for the darkness of Between without a backward glance.

Jack bit her lip. "This never gets any easier. I wish I could make my own fox lights."

"You're not the only one," Hikaru whispered, so low that I thought only I heard him.

Did he mean that he wished Jack was a fox spirit,

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like him? Or just that he wished he were older and more powerful, able to control his lightning the way the others did? I had no way of knowing, and somehow I didn't think he'd appreciate being asked.

Jack nodded a respectful goodbye to Araki, squared her shoulders, and stepped after Rachel. I moved forward, hyper-conscious of Shinobu silently shadowing me. My instincts were begging me to sneak a quick look at his expression, but the rest of me shied away in sheer embarrassment. I couldn't understand why this was so hard.

"Farewell, sword-bearer," the king said, appearing again – OK, that was getting freaky – on the crown of the hill overhead. "I wish you good fortune, and offer a piece of advice. Keep a close eye on your friend's sister. She may have trying times ahead of her."

Before I could ask what he was getting at, the king's head snapped up. A deep shudder worked through his body, making his vast fan of tails lash the air; their white tips blazed into jagged blue cones of lightning. Araki took a step back, one hand flying up to cover her mouth.

"Grandfather?" Hikaru began uncertainly.

My katana shrilled – a fierce, high-pitched tone that vibrated along my vertebrae. Without thinking, I reached back to grab the hilt, ready to draw the blade. My blood tingled and my heartbeat surged as my palm made contact with the silk wrappings. Then I froze. *What am I doing?* I whipped my hand away and stared at it for a

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moment as I flexed my fingers to confirm that they were under my control.

The ground jumped under my feet. Beyond Araki, the other side of the throne erupted with electricity. A new rupture. A small crowd of Kitsune – four of them, none older than a two-tails – stumbled out. They were ashen-faced and covered in dirt; one of them, splattered with blood, was clutching at her arm. She collapsed face-first into the grass and lay there, gasping for air and shaking with what looked like agony. The others hastily drew away from her.

Araki darted forward, falling to her knees beside the Kitsune girl. I saw with horror that the girl's twin tails were withering, the lush reddish fur turning powdery grey and shredding off before our eyes. Horror turned to disbelief when the dignified Araki threw back her head and let out a terrible wail.

The Kitsune who had come through the rupture with the injured fox spirit picked up the note, their voices joining into a low, wavering keen of sorrow. The noise spread through the amphitheatre, celebrations dying away as the whole assembly of fox spirits fell still in the aching song of grief.

"What's happening to her?" I cried out over the wailing. "Can't someone help her?"

Hikaru didn't even look at me. He lifted his face to the canopy of trees above and howled.

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I felt Shinobu's hand grasping mine, trying to pull me towards the rift. I shook my head, yanking free. I couldn't leave. They needed help!

The king's tails flicked in my direction. It was as if a massive hand had scooped me up and tossed me straight at the waiting blackness of the open rupture. I tumbled inside. Shinobu landed half on top of me with an "*Oof*".

"Wait!" I shouted, struggling to get up.

It was too late. The light had vanished and the rupture closed.

The Kitsune Kingdom was gone.

Klara Wozniak pulled the little cloth cap off her head in a puff of flour and stuffed it into her locker with one hand, swiftly undoing her tight French plait with the other. Long, curling strands of dark hair fell around her face, and she shook them out, sighing with relief.

"You think you're in a shampoo advert or something?" Sharon, the other baker's assistant, sneered as she walked into the back room.

Sharon's blonde hair was about three inches long, ragged-looking, and tipped with orange after an ill-fated home-dyeing attempt. Klara knew Sharon was just jealous – and in a bad mood because she had been scolded for messing up the iced buns – so she didn't bother to reply. *No time for bad thoughts today,* she reminded herself, changing out of the white baker's overalls and back into her usual

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uniform of jeans, T-shirt and jacket.

Her boyfriend had managed to get a couple of days off from his job at the warehouse, and Klara had the next two days free too. She wanted to enjoy the time to the fullest. If she knew Stephen, he'd be making her breakfast in their tiny flat right now. She could feel the silly smile on her own face as she remembered her twenty-first birthday, when he'd presented her with scrambled eggs, toast and a pink rose in a jam-jar.

She wrapped her scarf – a present her baba had sent from Poland for that same birthday – around her neck. She fingered the ends of the brightly coloured scarf for a moment, remembering the letter she had got from her grandmother the day before. The old lady was getting eccentric. Baba claimed to be having bad dreams about Klara, and actually begged her to come home, as if she really thought Klara was going to up and leave her whole life just because of one of Baba's silly premonitions! Baba was famous in Klara's village for her so-called sixth sense, but Klara and her father had never set any store by it. Especially since Baba claimed Klara had a little of the gift too. That always made her laugh. She'd never had a vision or seen a spirit in her life.

Still smiling, Klara slammed her locker shut and scooted out of the bakery's rear door into the small back street the business shared with a book/coffee shop and a pub. It was frosty cold, but the sky Klara could see between the roofs

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was primrose yellow, tinged with baby blue. It was going to be a beautiful day. Even the strong smell of burning and rot in the air – probably from the skip – couldn't ruin her mood.

"Hey, Klara!" Sharon shouted, shoving the door open just as Klara was about to slip past the skip and out onto the main road. "You didn't wipe down – it's your turn."

"No, it is not." Klara turned back reluctantly. "It is yours. I did it yesterday."

"You're always skiving off," Sharon whined – without, Klara noted, bothering to deny it.

"You would get your own work done faster if you spent less time worrying about mine," Klara said firmly. She was already reaching into her pocket for her mobile. Stephen would be waiting.

Sharon muttered something nasty about immigrants under her breath. Klara hesitated just for a second, the urge to respond rising up like bile in the back of her throat. She bit it back. *She's not worth it. She's not worth it…*

The alley went dark, as if a cloud had passed over the sun. A sudden gust of that awful rot-and-burning scent stirred Klara's hair, filling her ears with the eerie sound of dead leaves scattering over concrete. But there were no leaves on the ground. Instinctively, she glanced up.

A great misshapen *thing* was crouched on the roof above her, talons digging into the wall of the bakery. Its monstrous wings blocked out the sky.

Klara's knees gave way and she hit the ground next to

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the skip, hard. The mobile flew from her hand as she flung her arms up over her head.

No. It was impossible. It couldn't be real. There was no such thing as monsters. No such thing.

"What are you doing, freakshow?" Sharon demanded. "*Euw* – what's that smell?"

Klara realized that the other woman hadn't seen *it*. She was coming closer. *Idiota!*

"Shut up!" Klara managed to choke out. The rising stench of death, singed hair and decaying flesh made her gag. "Get down! Get inside!"

It was already too late. Darkness and dry chittering filled the alley as the thing swooped. Sharon let out a shrill, terrified scream – then went silent.

Klara didn't have the chance to scream at all.

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